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USING E-LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES IN THE POST-GRADUATE ENGLISH COURSE AT NTU “KHPI”

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Abstract. The experience of introduction of E-learning into the English course for post-graduates at NTU “KhPI” is discussed. The major advantages of blended education in studying a foreign language are analyzed. It is concluded that introduction of distance education may be very effective especially for adult learners.

Keywords: E-learning, distance education, blended courses, post-graduates, teaching English language.

ЗАСТОСУВАННЯ ТЕХНОЛОГІЙ E-LEARNING В КУРСІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ДЛЯ АСПІРАНТІВ У НТУ «ХПІ»

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Анотація. Розглядається досвід впровадження технологій E-learning в курс англійської мови для аспірантів в НТУ «ХПІ». Аналізуються основні переваги «змішаного» навчання при вивченні іноземної мови. Робиться висновок, що застосування дистанційної освіти може бути достатньо ефективним, особливо для дорослих студентів.

Ключові слова: E-learning, дистанційна освіта, змішані курси, аспіранти, викладання англійської мови.

E-learning has now become an equal means of delivering and getting knowledge and developing skills to progress in one's profession together with regular face-to-face instruction. The number and variety of available courses and technologies is still growing as well as the number of students choosing distance education. Top universities throughout the world offer on-line educational programs through videos, quizzes and assignments from leading professors [1] enabling teaching of hundreds of thousands of students. This innovative approach to education has already proved its effectiveness and convenience. Thus, according to [2], by 2006, 3.5 million students were participating in on-line learning at

institutions of higher education only in the United States. These courses are provided mostly in English.

One of the barriers in accessing such highest quality education for Ukrainian students in most cases is insufficient knowledge of English. All students at National Technical University “Kharkiv Polytechnic Institute” (NTU “KhPI”) study foreign languages in traditional classes. To meet today’s tendencies in using Internet technologies in education the chair of foreign languages of NTU “KhPI” has developed several distance courses both for under-graduates and for post-graduates. In this study we concentrate on the analysis of our teaching experience in introduction of elements of distance education within English course for post-graduates.

One of the goals of this English course is developing the language skills necessary for adaptation in the international educational and scientific area. Besides, a strong motive for post-graduates is passing a compulsory “candidate minimum” exam in a foreign language. Given rather little academic time for tuition of our post-graduate students and their involvement in their own research and business work, we try to engage all possibilities to intensify the mastering of the language. One of the tools is using distance forms of education aimed mostly for those who lack time for classroom practice. For this end the distance course “English grammar in tests” was developed within the program of the distance courses development carried out at NTU “KhPI”. Besides the distance course itself designed in programming environment MOODLE, we use other means as well, i.e. on-line communication tools, e.g. “Skype” or “Google-talk”, e-mails etc.

There are lots of advantages of on-line education and they are well-known and quite evident [3, 4].

- Students can study anywhere they have access to a computer and Internet: at home, at work, in a business trip, in a café supplied with Wi-Fi connection, etc.

- Self-paced learning modules allow students to work at their own pace. This is very important for post-graduated engaged in business, industrial or any other activity.

- E-learning can accommodate different learning styles and facilitate learning through a variety of activities. Our distance course features theoretical grammar materials, practice assignments, videos, tests and supplementary and reference materials. As our course is testing-oriented, it involves comprehensive test system including different test types, e.g. free response questions, true or false questions, or multiple-choice questions.

- Real learning often requires some failure. But no one likes to fail in a classroom full of other people. With e-learning a student feels psychologically safer when making mistakes. This particularly concerns adult learners, especially post-graduates, who as a rule are highly qualified in their field of knowledge but may feel not at ease being aware of their sometimes not very advanced level in English. So e-learning and e-testing encourages students to be more active and creative.

- Students can start over again if they feel uncertain about the level of their knowledge, the opportunity they are usually deprived of in class. The idea behind our distance course was not only to test students but also to supply them with reference theoretical materials and examples, so that any time they fail in a test they may revise the basic rules, examine the samples and then repeat the test. Another feature of e-testing provided by the integrated media Moodle is the possibility of creating a vast test pool and random retrieving of each test assignment set. So every time a student repeats the same test of the same topic it will contain a different array of test instructions. Thus the thesis that practice improves learning is fully realized.

Though there are certain disadvantages in on-line learning.

- Slow Internet connections or older computers may make accessing course materials frustrating.

- Learners with low motivation or bad study habits may fall behind.

- Without the routine structures of a traditional class, students may get lost or confused about course activities and deadlines. We consider it very important to maintain at least from-time-to-time face-to-face communication with our students who have no opportunity to attend regular classes. These sessions may reveal weak and strong points of the student and efforts needed to keep him or her to-date. For students located in another town or city we have arranged connection through on-line services that provide voice communication and instant messaging, which cannot fully substitute a regular lesson but has its own advantage as a personal tutorial.

- Instructor may not always be available when students are studying or need help. This point is most vital when studying a language. Students, especially beginners, badly need assurance whether they have done well. Besides, training such skills as pronunciation is unimaginable without a tutor.

Bearing in mind all pros and cons of distance education and having a certain experience in introduction e-courses into teaching English, we strongly believe that in studying a language there is no alternative to so-called “blended courses” that combine conventional face-to-face instruction and e-learning. This technology has been successfully practiced within the academy for more that four decades [5].

Another problem is the assessment of a student’s success. In traditional classroom a teacher can evaluate almost unerring if a student has done his assignment himself. It is impossible in a virtual space. A student with low motivation to studies can always find some ways to cheat. Cheating is common in education and not only in this country. 75% of American students are reported to cheat sometime during their college career [6]. Blended type of education allows to partially overcome this problem as well because high grades in on-line testing (if it is done with somebody else’s help) will mean nothing if the student fails to do similar assignments in class.

Our experience has proved that one of the most valuable benefits of e-testing is integrated assessment mechanism for students and instructor. A student can immediately see his/her results and, if they are not perfect, revise theoretical material before repeating the test. Unlike face-to-face classes, a student may have an opportunity of multiple testing in order to improve his or her results. On the other hand the teacher is provided with the results of testing which are obtained automatically based on the predefined answers and is freed from time-consuming checking routine of hundreds of tests.

Thus our students are supplied with a powerful tool for advancement of their language skills through combined learning.

We can conclude that blended courses provide the best solution for studying a foreign language, which would be not the substitution of a live contact course, but the use of a combination of an experienced live instructor skills and high-tech tools. Besides, these tools can stimulate the students' activity. There are more potential advantages in online learning than drawbacks. For example, all learning materials are available on demand and at any time. Furthermore, computerized assessment system gives immediate feedback to the user and facilitates routine teacher's work.

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